

Done S.

## GRAND MESA SLOPES SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREA

### ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR GRAND JUNCTION RESOURCE AREA RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT, EA Number: CO-076-4-51

#### PART I, INTRODUCTION, PROPOSED ACTION, AND ALTERNATIVES

A management plan for the Grand Mesa Slopes Special Management Area (GMS) has been prepared and adopted by Grand Mesa Slopes Advisory Group participants and interested landowners. A map and summary of the GMS Management Plan is attached. The GMS Management Plan is both a land use plan and a cooperative agreement to manage about 80 square miles of mixed ownership land immediately southeast of Grand Junction, Colorado. The main issues addressed in the GMS Management Plan are protection of municipal watersheds, managing critical wildlife habitat, protecting open space and scenic values, protecting range values, preserving public access, and recreation use management. The ability to effectively deal with these issues has been critically threatened by scattered land ownership, the rapid pace of subdivision and development in Mesa County, and an uncoordinated mix of land management authorities.

The GMS Management Plan has been developed over an approximately three year period and has included a broad range of interests (see section IV for a list of participants). Identification of GMS issues and analysis of alternatives to deal with these issues has involved the GMS Advisory Group which consists of all interested persons. A GMS Steering Committee has also been formed consisting of representatives of key interests (BLM, US Forest Service, City of Grand Junction, Town of Palisade, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Mesa County, ranchers, adjacent private landowners, and recreation interests).

#### PROPOSED ACTION:

Four of the actions proposed on BLM land in the GMS Management Plan require amendment of the Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan, 1987 (RMP). These actions involve: (1) Changing classification of approximately 7,600 acres of BLM land from "suitable for disposal" to "retention as BLM land or suitable for exchange"; (2) Classifying approximately 1,200 acres of BLM land as suitable for exchange; (3) Designating approximately 20,000 acres of BLM land as limited to motor vehicle travel only on designated routes, and; (4) Designating approximately 500 acres of BLM land as open for off-highway-vehicle (OHV) use. The proposed action covered by this Environmental Assessment is amendment of the RMP to accomplish the four proposals described above.

Conformance With Land Use Plan: The four actions described above are not in conformance with the RMP. At the time the RMP was written the 7,600 acres of BLM land identified for disposal were considered isolated tracts with few recreation opportunities and little potential for recreation management. Special BLM management actions were generally not proposed on BLM lands

identified for disposal, particularly with OHV management. The 7,600 acres identified for disposal are designated "open" for OHV use. Therefore the 500 acres proposed for "open" designation are technically already open, but the implications of GMS planning would result in a more intensively used OHV area. On most of the 20,000 acres proposed for limited designation the present designation is "limited to existing roads and trails". This would change to "limited to designated routes".

Since the RMP was written much of the intermingled private land has become public land (City of Grand Junction), and there has been an increased community interest in protecting and managing recreation and open space values near Grand Junction. Development and broad acceptance of the GMS Management Plan is evidence of changing resource concerns and community values, and need for amendment of the RMP.

#### ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE:

Development of the GMS Management plan involved consideration of numerous alternatives to address the issues in the area. GMS Advisory Group participants developed the final version of the plan after looking at alternatives and resource tradeoffs. The most feasible and practical alternatives are included in the GMS Management plan, and modifications to improve the plan can be considered at any time by the GMS Advisory Group.

The "no action" alternative would involve a high probability of future conversion of public lands to private lands throughout most of the GMS area, and virtual isolation of the remaining public lands from public use. The resulting private lands would be subject to subdivision and development typical of adjacent lands in Mesa County. Also, in the interim much of the GMS land would continue to be treated in an abusive manner as vacant land adjacent to an urban area. These probabilities have motivated the GMS Advisory Group to propose and gain public and landowner/manager acceptance of coordinated and cooperative planning for the GMS "open space" area. In particular, this includes the critical need for retention of public lands in public ownership to be managed cooperatively for public uses.

#### PART II, EXISTING ENVIRONMENT

The GMS area lies southeast of and adjacent to Grand Junction, Colorado, and ranges in elevation from 5,000'-10,000'. The lower elevations are Upper Sonoran desert with short scattered shrubs and desert bunch grasses. The lower slopes of the Grand Mesa are dominated with a pinion-juniper forest. Middle slopes are oakbrush grading into aspen. Upper slopes and the top of the Grand Mesa are alpine in nature with Douglas Fir and Spruce-Fir forests lining the fringes of open sagebrush-grassland parks.

The upper slopes and top of the Grand Mesa are important sources of municipal water supply for Grand Junction and Palisade. The middle

and lower slopes provide critical deer and elk winter range. The lower slopes and desert provide important "open space" recreation opportunities for the Grand Junction area. There is livestock use on most of the GMS area on a seasonal basis. The Grand Mesa itself, rising a mile above the Colorado and Gunnison River valleys, is an important landscape feature for the Grand Junction area.

The GMS Management Plan and related materials contain a more detailed description of the resource issues and affected environment of the GMS area. Further basic resource information is available in the Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, 1987.

The primary environmental differences between the RMP and GMS Management Plan resulted from changes in land ownership and community values in the last decade. Landowners and land managers in the area have also grown more concerned with the need for coordinated management. Increased public use and rapid development of open space in Mesa County has made the local community more aware of the threats to community values and the need for coordinated planning to protect open space and related resources.

### PART III, DESCRIPTION OF IMPACTS

#### Critical Elements Review:

<u>Critical Element</u>	<u>Present</u>		<u>Affected</u>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Air Quality	X		X	
ACEC'S		X		X
Cultural Resources	X		X	
Farmlands, Prime/Unique		X		X
Floodplains		X		X
Native American Religious Concerns		X		X
Wilderness		X		X
T&E Species	X		X	
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid	X		X	
Water Quality	X		X	
Wetlands, Riparian Zones	X		X	
Wild & Scenic Rivers		X		X

#### Description Of Impacts To Critical Elements :

The air quality on 20,000 acres of GMS, and on adjacent areas, may generally improve due to reduced dust from OHV traffic off of roads and reduction in creation of new roads and play areas. It is probable that dust from the existing OHV use area at Whitewater Hill would increase as use increases in the 500 acres of GMS that would be designated "open" to OHV use. Nearby residents have expressed concern about the potential for increased dust levels.

Although GMS is not a formally designated Area of Critical

Environmental Concern (ACEC) it is an area with several important environmental concerns that would be better protected. The primary resource values that would benefit from GMS management are municipal watersheds and facilities, critical wildlife habitat, scenic and open space values, range values, and recreational access and management.

Municipal watersheds would benefit through better management of public use that would result in less chance for pollution of drinking water or vandalism of water supply facilities. Management of wildlife habitat would improve through better management of public use in the critical wildlife habitat areas, and through better public information and education throughout the area. In the longer term there would be better protection of wildlife habitat through protection of natural "open space" values in all of the GMS area. Overall scenic values would also be preserved. The GMS public information program should reduce harassment of livestock and vandalism of range facilities. Public access throughout the GMS area would be preserved and better managed with signing, public information, and through agreements with private landowners.

Cultural resource management and protection would continue under existing BLM policies. Some of the cultural resources that occur in the GMS area would be better protected from surface disturbance through better control of OHV travel areas and with improved public use management and information.

The endangered species that use the GMS area include Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon. Several sensitive species also inhabit the area (animal: Burrowing Owl, Kit Fox; plant: Spineless Hedgehog Cactus, Cryptantha elata). These and other species should benefit from the more natural and longer term habitat management emphasis in GMS, and through better management of public use.

Some of the GMS desert lands adjacent to residential areas have historically been used for residential and agricultural trash dumping. In recent years there have been several desert cleanup efforts that have significantly reduced the areas trash accumulation. "No Dumping" signs have also been posted in problem areas. GMS management would further reduce trash dumping in the area through better signing, self-policing by users, and cooperative actions with Mesa County in managing lands adjacent to the Mesa County Landfill.

Protection of municipal watersheds and facilities is an important GMS goal. Municipal watershed lands in municipal ownership control access to much of the GMS area. Although the municipalities are planning for authorizing some public access, this use is being planned so that watershed values and facilities are protected.

Several riparian zones exist in the GMS area. Better public use management should result in better long term protection for these areas.

Amendment of the RMP and implementation of the GMS Management Plan would provide open space access and opportunities to public land users from all levels of society, and would not disproportionately impact minority groups or low income populations.

#### Description Of Other Impacts:

The scope of the GMS Management Plan includes many issues outside of those discussed as part of this Environmental Analysis for the proposed RMP amendment. However, the ability to successfully implement the broader GMS Management Plan is interrelated with the RMP amendment actions covered in this Environmental Analysis. In addition to the impacts on the Critical Elements discussed above there would be a number of other affects resulting from implementation of the GMS Management Plan. Some more specific impacts related to the proposed RMP amendment are discussed below:

PROPOSAL (1) Change classification of approximately 7,600 acres of BLM land from "suitable for disposal" to "retention as BLM land or suitable for exchange": Since the RMP was completed there has been little realistic public interest in private acquisition of these RMP "disposal" lands. In contrast there has been markedly increased public recreational use of these and intermingled vacant private lands. Continued public ownership would result in preservation of recreation opportunities, manageability, and public access to much of the GMS area. Overall public concern for the GMS open space concept is evidence of changing public values in land use opportunities adjacent to Grand Junction, and recognition of the need for open space in the rapidly developing Grand Junction area. Under GMS management BLM lands would remain open to proposals and modifications compatible with managed open space and other uses typical of BLM land (ie; rights-of-way, grazing, public utility projects, special events, land exchanges, etc.).

The No Action Alternative includes the strong likelihood of fragmented, piecemeal residential and commercial development of both public and private lands in most of the GMS area. Fragmented private ownership would result in access restrictions to remaining nearby public lands, and the likelihood of even greater fragmentation of ownership through sale and further subdivision of private and probably the intermingled public lands. Manageability of the remaining public lands for any purposes would be severely reduced in the long term, particularly for recreation, open space, scenic, wildlife, watershed, and range values.

PROPOSAL (2) Classify approximately 1,200 acres of BLM land as suitable for exchange: The BLM lands specifically identified for exchange in the GMS Management Plan are all actively being utilized for municipal water facility purposes (pipelines, ditches, reservoirs, spring developments, etc.). The municipalities involved (Grand Junction and Palisade) have an interest in owning lands on which their facilities are located to improve long term tenure in facilities management and investments. Both

municipalities have indicated their interest in acquiring private lands and access that would benefit BLM and GMS management efforts, to use to exchange for these BLM lands. Both municipalities have also agreed to maintain overall scenic and wildlife values on any acquired BLM lands, and to provide for public access through these lands in a manner consistent with water quality, facility protection, and in coordination with GMS Advisory Group interests. Agreements to protect any cultural resources may also be used if needed. A more site specific Environmental Analysis would be written for any actual exchange proposal.

The No Action Alternative would result in continued exposure of water supplies and facilities to pollution and vandalism, and the likelihood for complete elimination of public use on municipal lands (which also control access to most of the BLM lands in the GMS area).

PROPOSAL (3) Designate approximately 20,000 acres of BLM land as limited to motor vehicle travel only on designated routes: Under this proposal most existing public travel routes would be designated and remain open to OHV travel. This involves a network of about 100 miles of travel routes generally in the lower elevation areas of GMS. Designation would allow for continued public access by motor vehicles in the GMS area, but would close hillclimb areas and stop the proliferation of new roads and trails.

Under the No Action Alternative most of the 7,600 acres of BLM "disposal" land would remain essentially open to unrestricted OHV use. It is likely this would continue to result in creation of new roads, trails, and hillclimb areas, and a general increase in cross-country motor vehicle travel. The overall affects of increased OHV use would involve adverse impacts to watershed, soils, vegetation, wildlife, and natural aesthetic values.

PROPOSAL (4) Designate approximately 500 acres of BLM land on Whitewater Hill as open for OHV use: Public use plans for the Whitewater Hill OHV area include identification of private land boundaries, informational signing, fencing, road improvement and separation of motorized from non-motorized uses. This would also include identification of motorized and non-motorized trails and use corridors that extend east into larger blocks of public land in GMS. Moderate growth in OHV use can be expected in the 500 acre open area, and in non-motorized use on adjacent lands (horse riding, mountain biking, hiking, and trailhead parking). The proposal would include designating a corridor of land about 1/4 mile wide along one mile of the east side of the Highway 50 right-of-way as closed to OHV use. Significant OHV use is occurring in this corridor and has created a large amount of visual scarring which is highly visible from Highway 50. Once the area is closed, the scarring would decrease and eventually disappear with time. The OHV use in this corridor would be displaced further east into the adjacent proposed open area.

The proposed Whitewater Hill OHV area is presently being used as an

OHV hill climb and play area because of attractive terrain, good access, and proximity to Grand Junction. The landscape is one of relatively barren Mancos Shale desert foothills and bluffs. Other adjacent and nearby land uses include vacant public and private desert lands, a drag strip, trap shooting range, model airplane flying range, the Mesa County landfill, a presently unused stock car track (that is currently a residential/commercial recreation property), a Colorado state highway maintenance yard, Highway 50, one adjacent residential property, and the town of Whitewater (one mile south). The BLM land on Whitewater Hill is technically already designated "open" for OHV use (because it is identified for disposal in the RMP). OHV use levels are moderate and increasing.

Several nearby landowners are opposed to OHV use in this area and would rather see the area closed (or greatly restricted) than designated open. They are concerned with the likelihood of increased noise, dust, and the potential for reduced property values. Other nearby landowners are in favor of proposed management of the Whitewater Hill OHV area as a way to better manage existing OHV and other uses. They would like to preserve a variety of public access opportunities to GMS and protect resource values that are threatened by the current "open" designation.

In a broader perspective the 500 acre Whitewater Hill OHV area functions as a tradeoff for the 20,000 acres proposed for restriction of OHV use to designated trails. Alternatives and tradeoffs involved in this proposal have been analyzed by GMS participants, and the present GMS proposal approved, with the objection of several nearby landowners. It was determined that the least disruptive and most manageable open OHV area was within the presently used area on Whitewater Hill. During analysis of alternative areas, there was no identification of an alternative area that would be practical for OHV use management, or cause less overall impact to natural resources and other landowners.

Two general alternative areas were more seriously looked at. One was to try to move the existing OHV use on Whitewater Hill another mile or two further east. This would involve the cost of building several miles of upgraded access road, intensive OHV use of land that is not presently impacted by OHV use, unwelcome impacts to other landowners, and a less manageable OHV use boundary. The other alternative was to try to move OHV use to a parcel of BLM land about six miles further south. This would double the distance most current users presently come from and would make other nearby public and vacant private lands more likely to be impacted. This area is also little impacted by current OHV use, would result in significantly increased vehicle travel on about five miles of a dusty gravel road through a rural residential area, and also impact adjacent landowners.

With the No Action Alternative OHV use would continue to grow in both numbers of users and area affected (at Whitewater Hill and on other public and vacant lands in the general area). Noise and dust

would increase, as well as trespass onto nearby, unmarked private land. The highly visible Highway 50 corridor would continue to be heavily disturbed by cross-country motor vehicle travel. Non-motorized users would tend to be displaced or avoid the general area.

The alternative of closing or greatly restricting OHV use in the Whitewater Hill area would improve the desirability of the area for non-motorized recreational uses. It would also eliminate the noise, dust, and surface disturbance typically caused by OHV use. However, attempts to actually close or severely restrict OHV use on Whitewater Hill would be difficult to implement due to open terrain features, the presence of numerous trails and hillclimb areas, lack of property boundary identification, and level of historical OHV use. Closure would eliminate or displace approximately 5,000 visitor days of OHV use annually. This would particularly affect OHV users presently coming from the Orchard Mesa area who would likely be displaced to other nearby lands. The alternative of closing the Whitewater Hill area may also lead OHV users to withdraw their support for limited OHV designations in other GMS areas.

#### PART IV, CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A variety of persons, agencies, interest groups, and institutions have been involved in development of the GMS Management Plan. These include: City of Grand Junction, Town of Palisade, Mesa County Planning Commission, BLM, US Forest Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Loring Ranch, Lumbardy Ranch, Lloyd Ranch, Mesa College, School District 51, Museum of Western Colorado, Colorado State Forest Service, Orchard Mesa Irrigation District, Soil Conservation Service, Grand Valley Rural Power Company, Colorado Ute Electric, Mesa County Sheriff, Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Grand Junction Visitor & Convention Bureau, Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce, Club 20, Colorado OHV Coalition, Audubon Club, Sierra Club, Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association, Mesa Wranglers, Sobre El Rio Homeowners Association, Trout Unlimited, Colorado Wildlife Federation, Colorado Mountain Club, Grand Junction/Mesa County Riverfront Commission, Palisades National Bank, Orchard Mesa Gun Club, Western Slope ATV Association, Motorcycle Trail Riders Association, Powderhorn Ski Area, Snowskippers Snowmobile Club, Grand Mesa Nordic Council, Colorado National Monument Association, Mesa Monument Striders, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Mesa County Land Trust, Orchard Mesa Plan Citizen Review Committee, Grand Valley Irrigation Company, Colorado Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, and Mesa County Water Users Association. A number of these entities represent a wide range of other community, local, and regional interests. There are also over 400 individual participants on the GMS mailing list.

Special approval actions for acceptance of the GMS Management Plan have been made by the Mesa County Planning Commission, City of Grand Junction, and Town of Palisade.



BLM Reviewers Names, Resource/Concern, Date:

<u>Ben F. Hyde</u>	<u>Recreation</u>	<u>7-19-94</u>
<u>Michael Montemurro</u>	<u>Cultural Resources</u>	<u>11/18/94</u>
<u>Ron Lambeth</u>	<u>Wildlife</u>	<u>7-12-94</u>
<u>Ronald Thygeson</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>7-19-94</u>
<u>David W. Stevens</u>	<u>NEPA Compliance</u>	<u>7-19-94</u>

Preparer Name, Title, Date:

<u>Carol Savage</u>	<u>Realty Specialist</u>	<u>7/12/94</u>
---------------------	--------------------------	----------------

PART V, FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD

I have reviewed this Environmental Assessment and determined that the proposed action would not have a significant impact on the human environment, and that an Environmental Statement is not required. The process and interest group participation involved in development of the GMS Management Plan resulted in broad community, agency, and interest group acceptance. Numerous issues were resolved and alternatives analyzed by GMS participants to reach consensus decisions outlined in the GMS Management Plan. Amendment of the Grand Junction Area Resource Management Plan, 1987 (RMP) is needed to accommodate decisions in the GMS Management Plan. It is my decision to proceed with amendment of the RMP and implement the proposed actions described in this Environmental Assessment.

RECOMMENDED:

<u>Catherine Robinson</u>	<u>1/9/95</u>
AREA MANAGER	DATE

RECOMMENDED:

<u>Mark T. Morse</u>	<u>3/7/95</u>
DISTRICT MANAGER	DATE

APPROVED:

<u>Cindy McKim</u>	<u>3/20/95</u>
Acting STATE DIRECTOR	DATE

(Attached: GMS Management Plan and Map)

(RECORD OF DECISION IN LETTER FORM):

Dear Grand Mesa Slopes Interest:

The following information concerns my decision to amend the Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan, 1987 (RMP), to facilitate implementation of decisions made in the Grand Mesa Slopes Special Management Area (GMS) Management Plan. This information is a formal statement of the BLM decision record and finding of no significant impact.

The Environmental Analysis for this RMP amendment covered the following proposals which were made in the GMS plan:

- 1) Changing classification of approximately 7,600 acres of BLM land from "suitable for disposal" to "retention as BLM land or suitable for exchange".
- 2) Classifying approximately 1,200 acres of BLM land as suitable for exchange.
- 3) Designating approximately 20,000 acres of BLM land as limited to motor vehicle travel only on designated routes.
- 4) Designating approximately 500 acres of BLM land as open for off-highway-vehicle (OHV) use.

I have reviewed the Environmental Assessment for these proposals and determined that the proposals would not have a significant impact on the human environment, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The process and interest group participation involved in development of the GMS plan resulted in broad community, agency, and interest group acceptance. Numerous issues were resolved and alternatives analyzed by GMS participants to reach decisions outlined in the GMS plan. Amendment of the RMP is needed to accommodate these BLM related decisions in the GMS plan. It is my decision to amend the RMP and implement the proposals described in the Environmental Assessment.

We received several public comments concerning the proposed "open to OHV" designation on Whitewater Hill. The Whitewater Hill area is an historical OHV use area. In the GMS plan this 500 acre area functions as the best available tradeoff to OHV users for severely limiting OHV use on about 20,000 acres of other land. There is a well demonstrated community need for an open OHV area in the general vicinity. This relatively small open area would adequately provide for OHV use and better protect thousands of acres of nearby public and vacant private lands both within and outside of the GMS area.

Several alternative open areas were looked at and discussed in the Environmental Assessment, including one mentioned in the public comments (moving the open area about 1-1/2 miles further east). The people who made this comment felt moving the open area would significantly reduce the areas visibility from Highway 50 and Whitewater, preserve a better sense of open space, and better protect Whitewater's community image.

The GMS Plan proposed a 1/4 mile buffer between Highway 50 and the open area that follows natural landscape features that would screen most of the open area from Highway 50. The open area would be somewhat visible from Whitewater. Moving the area 1-1/2 miles further east would involve moving OHV disturbance to an area that is presently little impacted by OHV use, would still be somewhat visible from Whitewater, would require significant additional costs to implement (road construction, boundary identification), would be less manageable from a supervision standpoint, and would encroach on lands that are presently planned for non-motorized recreational uses. The GMS Plan does propose a non-motorized zone between the open area and adjacent private land, and a relatively vast non-motorized use area on public lands to the east.

Complaints concerning historical OHV use in the proposed open area have been rare. It is recognized that in the future the proposed open area could become an intensive OHV use area that could adversely impact the growing Whitewater community. The future option of reconsidering this portion of the RMP amendment is always available, but does not presently seem warranted based on the overall public interest at this time and in the foreseeable future.

If you have an interest that is adversely affected by the proposed RMP amendment, and have participated in the GMS planning process you may protest the proposed amendment by following the information on the attached "RMP Amendment Protest Information" sheet.

Sincerely,

/s/ Cindy McKee

Bob Moore  
State Director